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POPULAR ROMANCE AND
THE WOMAN READER

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AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE

'Popular Romance and the Woman Reader' is divided into three parts. The first is an analysis of theories of reading, of the woman reader and of how we read popular texts. The first section discusses women readers and popular romance in a Western context, with special reference to an American study by Janice Radway, Reading the Romance, and the second looks at how similar issues might apply amongst African women readers. Part II is a textual analysis of several romance texts. The final part is an account of four interviews in which black South African women talk about their romance reading. Although the focus of the study is on popular romance, I also intend it to re-examine the categories of 'woman reader' and 'black woman reader in South Africa'. As new freedoms are opened to the reader in South Africa, it is offered as a contribution to an understanding of how reading, and the construction of subjectivity itself, can be transformed in the future.

In Part I, a study of women romance readers in America by Jane Radway is examined. Particular attention is given to its challenge to models of institutional reading (models such as Stanley Fish's 'interpretive community') and the failure of these models to consider adequately ways in which the reading subject engages with the more recalcitrant features of the text. In addition, the relationship between gender and reading is briefly explored. Given the way men and women experience their lives, do they read differently? Does narrative pleasure mean different things? Some of the ways in which African romance fiction is being read is then examined, focusing on Obiechina's study An African Popular Literature and looking at ways in which women are portrayed in African romance. Finally, it is argued that whereas the romance readers in Radway's study seek an imaginative escape from the politics of dominance and subservience, South African black women's writing and criticism makes little use of imaginative escape from the polarities of a language in which division and categorisation are the bases of perception.

In Part II, a selection of Mills and Boon and Harlequin romance texts are analyzed, drawing on the perspectives explored in Radway's study. This section looks at how heroines' initial impulse towards independence reverts to a traditional sexual division of labour by the end of the novels, how female sexuality is given expression in romance, and how, as the heroine learns to re-interpret the hero's actions, so the reader can believe in the possibility of transforming the dissatisfactions she feels in her own relationship through sustained action on her part.

Part III consists of a discourse analysis (rather than a data analysis) of extracts from interviews conducted with four groups of women. The extracts are from interviews in which the women talk about their general reading practices and concern the more specific aspect of their experience of romance reading. The participants in the interviews had all matriculated and most had had some further training. Several held university degrees. The analysis challenges those studies which allow personal accounts to 'speak for themselves' and their assumption that the subject provides the limit and unity of experience, and offers a symptomatic reading of oppositional practices which, although limited, dispute the control of ideological forms.

The conclusion considers the significance of the similarity which emerges between the reading practices of women in Radway's American study and the black South African women. It is suggested that notions of the 'South African reader' and of 'African feminism' as they are currently understood need to be revised and re-opened.

PART I

Janice Radway, in her study Reading the Romance,¹ confronts major questions concerning the status of the reader, the literary text and of what it can be taken as evidence. She rejects New Critical and formalist studies of readers and reading which have based their interpretations on an inscribed, model or ideal reader, a reader whose task it is to construe the correct meaning inserted by an author into his or her text according to a received canon of reading practices. Instead, influenced by the work of British Marxists like Raymond Williams who produced ideological analyses of the structures of determination, she turns toward the historical context of a literary text. This involves the synchronic study of a particular community in order to specify how the individuals involved may construct texts as meaningful structures. She calls her project an "ethnography of reading".²

An ethnography of reading, however, still conceives of reading as interpretation only and focuses on the differential interpretation of texts.³ And ethnographic description is interpretation - a construction mediated by a construction - and will not therefore reveal a more objective cultural reality. Radway notes in her introduction how she realized this as her study progressed: "... the book was eventually hi-jacked by its

¹ Janice Radway, Reading the Romance, Verso, London, 1987.

² Ibid., p.4.

³ Ibid., p.5.

own theory and subject".⁴ She initially attempts to address the problem by proclaiming her feminism and acknowledging its part in the evaluations she makes. She finds, though, that her notion of what feminism is⁵ itself being challenged: she writes of an often "painful process of transformation ... when the difficulties of accounting for the complexities of actual romance reading produced a more intense and personal engagement with feminist theory and its analysis of women's situation".⁵ One of the things that contributed to this process of transformation was her realisation, during her study of the Smithton women romance readers, of the significance of the event of reading, as distinguished from the meaning of the text constructed. The women she interviewed repeatedly answered questions about the meaning of romances by talking about the meaning of romance reading as a social event in a familial context.⁶ Thus although Radway's study continues to intersect with the notion of historical context - she needs to investigate the way romance reading as a form of behaviour operates as a complex intervention in the lives of social subjects, women who see themselves first as wives and mothers⁷ - it also confronts the question of interpretation, and therefore of the (woman) reader, itself.

Many of the issues Radway explores in her study have been debated amongst reader-response theorists. Stanley Fish attempts

⁴ Ibid., p.2.

⁵ Ibid., p.6.

⁶ Ibid., p.7.

⁷ Ibid., p.7.

to avoid the monism of whether the text controls the reader or the reader the text by positing what turns out to be a further monism, the notion of an 'interpretative community'. Such a model of institutionalized reading does not adequately consider the ways in which the reading subject engages with the more recalcitrant features of the text, or with its power and authority. Post-structuralism challenges the very notion of a hermeneutic, and does not attempt to define the object of study nor the rules of interpretation. Literature is an already constituted and closed system of signs in which we are always already inscribed. The reader is the result of linguistic structures and therefore has only derivative status.⁸ Where understanding is governed by rules, the object of study can no longer be an individual reading, but the convention of reading - the ways in which a work complies with or undermines conventional procedures for making sense of things - itself.

Johnathan Culler argues that a reader's response will always be double and divided and that a study of reading will not permit a decisive choice between the authority of text or reader. The shifting movement between the two in 'stories of reading'⁹ is inescapable. To talk of reading as a woman, Culler argues, is on the one hand to imply a sexual identity and to privilege experience associated with that identity, while on the other it suggests that femaleness itself is a ground for question, a

⁸ Elizabeth Freund, The Return of the Reader, Methuen, NY, 1987, p.79.

⁹ J. Culler, quoted in E. Freund, The Return of the Reader, p.79.

condition that must be created: many women, for example, having learnt male interpretative strategies (one of which is to assert that readers have a certain (male) experience) do not read as women. Reading as a woman has always already occurred and yet must still be produced: the term 'woman' must be retained and the term itself must be interrogated as site of sexual identity, representation and subjectivity.

Patrocinio Schweickart,¹⁰ writing about feminist theories of reading, argues that theories which stress the impossibility of reading - for Culler, it is not possible to talk of reading as an autonomous act, since all the reader can do is play out roles already dramatised in the text - are dangerous for women. She endorses the notion of an interpretative community, but adds that the ruling interpretative communities are androcentric, and that this androcentricity is deeply entrenched in the modes of thought of men and women of these communities. Through a meshing of the context of writing and the context of reading, reading as an intersubjective encounter between reader and writer becomes not a dialectic of control - as it is for theorists such as Poulet, who uses metaphors of mastery and submission to represent the reader's suspension of his or her autonomous subjectivity - but of communication. Such a dialectic is informed, she says, by a desire for intimacy, or 'connectedness' between author and reader, rather than a desire to 'get it right'.¹¹ For theorists

¹⁰ Patrocinio Schweickart, 'Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading' in Elaine Showalter (ed.), Speaking of Gender, Routledge, New York, 1989.

¹¹ Ibid., p.38.

like Poulet, she argues, intimacy, while it is desired, is also viewed as a threat to one's integrity. For feminists, on the other hand (as in Adrienne Rich's writing on Emily Dickinson), the prospect of merging with another is problematical, but not threatening.¹² It seems to me that while the process of reading as a woman that Schweickart postulates expresses women's desire for n^ruturance, as represented or promised by the pre-oedipal mother, it neglects the twin desire in women for the power and autonomy associated with the pre-oedipal father. Such desire may conceivably separate women, as Dorothy Driver has argued in 'Woman As Sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise', through competition for the phallus, for a place closer to culture than to nature.¹³

On the one hand, Schweickart acknowledges that the process of 'emasculatation' (the process in which women, as readers, are taught to think as men, which results not in the acquisition of virile power, but in the endless division of the self against the self, for to identify with 'male' is to be 'not female') has the power to draw women into its designs because it answers to authentic desires in women, yet she asserts that, contrary to the irreducible impasse confronting Culler's reader, the feminist reader can take control of the reading experience. She can re-read the text by reading it as it is not meant to be read, against itself; she can safeguard against her desire for power

¹² Ibid., p.38.

¹³ Dorothy Driver, 'Woman as Sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise', in Journal of Literary Studies, vol. 14, 1, 1988, p.15.

(for example her desire to appropriate the text, in the absence of the author).¹⁴ It seems that Schweickart, ultimately, succumbs to a yearning for the authority of a unifying centre, a woman reader who, conscious of her own context as reader and of the historical circumstances under which the text was produced, can control the production of new meaning. It may be more appropriate to claim readings by women not as valid interpretations or re-readings of the texts as much as misreadings, which will generate other misreadings: to acknowledge, that is to say, our blindness to the nature of our own desires, which will in turn produce new insights into the nature of female desire itself. (The term 'misreading' is perhaps misleading insofar as it still implies that a phallogentric reading is the correct one. Schweickart's term 're-vision' may be more useful here.)

Tania Modleski is one of several feminist writers who have written recently on women as readers of romance. Introducing her study, she remarks that feminist critics have until recently attempted to distance themselves from the 'seductiveness'¹⁵ of feminine texts, and in so doing have turned against their 'worse selves', the ones not yet liberated from shameful fantasies. Modleski's views endorse Rosalind Coward's recognition of women's complicity in their own oppression, and break decisively with Shulamith Firestone's view of romance as an all-pervasive

¹⁴ P. Schweickart, 'Reading Ourselves', p. 37.

¹⁵ Tania Modleski, Loving with a Vengeance, Methuen, 1984, p.14.

manifestation of male ideology, which allows women the role of victim only. While Firestone's views tend to coincide with the views of Althusser, who sees ideology as co-extensive with life itself, critics like Modleski and Coward, who examine the possibilities of an immanent criticism, would argue, like Habermas, that to accept social ideology at face value is to fall for secondary revision. For them it is not simply the mechanisms of textual distortions that have to be reconstructed, for example, but the significance of those distortions that will have to be accounted for. Bearing the above theoretical approaches in mind, I would like to look at Radway's study of the Smithton women readers more closely.

The women who^m Radway spoke to prefaced their comments about the romances they read with accounts of the physical exhaustion and emotional depletion they experienced as a result of the responsibilities and duties of their roles as wife and mother. Radway suggests that these feelings are partly as a result of the fact that no-one in the patriarchal family is charged with their care. The women went on to say that romance reading provided them with emotional sustenance and a sense of well-being.¹⁶ The women, then, sought pleasure through the romance heroine at the moment in which they confronted their dissatisfaction with traditionally structured heterosexual relationships. Romance reading addresses needs, desires and wishes that their actual male partner cannot satisfy.¹⁷ Radway

¹⁶ J. Radway, Reading The Romance, p.12.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.12.

finds that the women's favourite romances are those in which the hero is constructed androgynously: although displaying masculine phallic power (promising the power and autonomy of the oedipal father), he also displays tenderness and attention of the sort that the women themselves claimed to desire (fulfilling the desire for a nurturing pre-oedipal mother). Thus Radway says, "Romance reading, it seemed to me, permitted the ritual retelling of the psychic process by which traditional heterosexuality was constructed for women, but it also seemed to exist as a protest against the fundamental inability of heterosexuality to satisfy the very demands which it engendered in women."¹⁸

The act of reading romances is, for these women, both a participation in myth and an interaction with the real conditions of their lives: the escape it provides refers not only to an intentional projection of a utopian future but to the conditions left behind.¹⁹ I hope to show further on in this study that the narrative structure of romance itself equivocates between its status as myth and realism. As the Smithton women's responses to questions about the aesthetic features of the texts they read suggests, however, we are not yet in a position to discuss the question of narrative strategy.

When the women were asked to talk about romances which they regarded as failures, they focused not on repetitive plots, for example, but on the intense emotions that the process of reading a bad book evoked in them. Radway records that if the events of

¹⁸ Ibid., p.13.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.11.

the heroine's story provoke too intense feelings such as anger at men, fear of rape and violence or worry about female sexuality or the need to live with an unexciting man, the romance will be discarded as a failure. The reader, she says, must be reassured that men and marriage really do mean good things for women.²⁰ That the women need to believe in the possibility of a happy ending in the stories of their own lives is evidenced elsewhere in the study: they insist that it is not their husbands and children that they are trying to escape when they read, but merely the demands of attending to the needs of their families. Believing they are naturally attuned to the emotional requirements of others, they express pride in their ability to serve their families.

The possibility of a 'happy ending' in their lives is most often confirmed by the happy endings in the stories the women choose to read. Tania Modleski, in Loving With a Vengeance,²¹ shows that the soap opera, another kind of romance and another kind of text, specifically does not end, because endings, such as children growing up and leaving, may bring meaninglessness to the mother, who feels she is no longer needed. The programmes keep the mother from desiring a focused existence by involving her in the pleasures of a fragmented life.²² The mother's gaze is invoked (through close-ups of her face (rather than her

²⁰ Ibid., p.184.

²¹ Tania Modleski, Loving With a Vengeance, Methuen, NY, 1984.

²² Ibid., p.102.

body)), but in order to provide anxiety about the welfare of others. The programmes distract her and distraction is crucial to her efficient functioning as a housewife: they fill the hours she spends in solitude and provide the fantasy of a self-sufficient family. The 'endlessness' of the soap opera technique is interesting in that it suggests that, given the way men and women experience their lives, narrative pleasure will mean different things. I hope to explore this further in the concluding section.

In written romances to date, as I indicated above, happy endings best confirm the possibilities of the reader's own happiness. Yet when the heroine achieves a happy ending, the reader's own psychic conflicts must increase, due to her failure to become a heroine, creating in her a greater dependency on the books. The need for a happy ending may mean that the reading strategies the women adopt are male not only because they are the only ones they know but because they desire, in part at least, to read as men.

An example of this is the woman reader's response to an expression of anger by the heroine. Although she may identify in part, she may, because she wants a happy ending, read this anger in male terms: Modleski writes about how the heroine's expression of resentment usually becomes the means of her belittlement. When this occurs, the reader - and writer - gazes upon the heroine (Berger has noted how men look at women, and how

women watch themselves being looked at).²³ This will result, as Schweickart has pointed out, not in a sense of virile power but in the fragmentation of the reading self. The male interpretive strategies the woman reader has learnt, and desired, will attempt to contain the identification she must feel with the heroine.

Most romantic fiction is narrated in the third person and this allows the reader greater knowledge of the hero than the heroine herself possesses. If the hero acts violently towards the heroine, for example, the reader can "tell herself" that he acted in this way because of his frustration at, for example, the heroine's lack of interest in him. She can, therefore, identify with the heroine's anger and fear - and the act of reading therefore provides an imaginative space in which she can express her negative feelings about men - and she can rely on the greater knowledge of the omniscient narration, and take comfort from the reassurance it provides.²⁴ If the woman reader, like the heroine, retroactively interprets men's behaviour, then she can learn to understand men. In so doing, she can avoid having to demand that male behaviour change.

If romances are stories representing a journey from victim to heroine, then novel readers create the same stories about the authors, whose lives they mythologize. We are all deeply affected by the idea of becoming a heroine, for the heroine is the image of an integral, coherent and signifying self, which

²³ John Berger, quoted in Tania Modleski, Loving With a Vengeance, p.53.

²⁴ Ibid., p.141.

suggests the resolution of 'femaleness' itself: if we can become a heroine, we can be a real woman, or resolve what it means to be a woman. Brownstein warns that in discussing "the fiction of Woman or the fiction of women",²⁵ however, we must avoid polarizing women and art, or identifying them with one another. Wanting to become a heroine can mean wanting liberation from the role of victim, but it can enclose the self within a ritually retold story.

In Brownstein's reading of Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa escapes her own ambiguity and complexity by assuming the role of Mrs. Dalloway, a version of the self constructed as artefact, as heroine.²⁶ In Alison Light's analysis of Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca,²⁷ the heroine needs Rebecca in order to mean: her femininityⁱⁿ is defined against Rebecca's overt sexuality. Light suggests that it is Rebecca, as the image of a confidently sexual woman, who induces du Maurier, and Light herself, to write. We see, then, women as readers and as writers, seeking to confront a gendered and desirous subjectivity.

When Radway asks one of the Smithton readers to explain her comment that a particular book is 'well-written', the woman does not point to the language used, but to that which the language refers: the story itself. Language is viewed as simply that which tells the story. Words are already meaningful, the meaning

²⁵ Ibid., p.XVI.

²⁶ Rachel Brownstein, Becoming a Heroine - Reading about Women in Novels.

²⁷ Alison Light, 'Returning to Mandalay: Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class' in Feminist Review.

attributed to signs is "natural" and language is regarded as a system of names for a true reality. Because language is not viewed as a system of historically and culturally relative codes, the women are not aware of their active construction of the story. Textual strategies help to blind them to their collaboration: 'frames' are supplied,²⁸ diminishing the overt need for interpretation by the reader. For example, although a reader will be able to infer a character's emotions, the author will state it anyway ("she was angry"). This attempts to contain the anxiety brought about by the fact that reading is a temporarily open-ended act.

Julia Kristeva²⁹ has argued that narration involves leaving the realm of disjunction in which we are in a position to judge statements, and entering into an experience of language in which the truth or falsehood of a statement is only established from within the text. This deferment of meaning opens up the reader to language, to the functioning of the signifier. This 'liberation' of language is provisional, however, because it is accompanied by the promise that the correct signifiers will be provided by the text. Narrative fiction always provides, at the end of the story, a final identity or a meaning which will explain all the details in the story that has preceded it. This meaning is secured outside the movement of language. The disjuncts which were temporarily suspended are united and any

²⁸ J. Radway, Reading the Romance, p.196.

²⁹ Julia Kristeva, in C. MacCabe, James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word, London, 1978, p.45.

suspense produced during the course of the narrative is dispelled. This is Freud's dialectic of pleasure and desire: the realist novel disrupts the position of pleasure only to reassure us of its return and in the gap of heightened tension (desire) is narrative. Narrative, however, can, according to Kristeva, acknowledge neither desire nor production.³⁰ Such a recognition would force a corresponding recognition that the 'temporary' discontinuity between signifier and signified which it has allowed, is in fact a fundamental discontinuity, a law of language based on the nature of the sign, which refuses movement towards an exterior.

The Smithton women readers want the ritually reaffirmed mythical ending of the romance, but they also want to understand the story as the resolution of one more individual woman's problems.³¹ When interviewed, they insisted that all the heroines are different, yet 60% of the women read the ending before reading or buying the book. Radway suggests that the equivocation of the romance between its status as myth or realism - through great attention to the material details of a fantasy world, for example - reflects the reader's, and the author's, deep unwillingness to admit that the perfect union of the ending is unattainable in real life. For although the romance story allows the woman reader to believe that she, like the heroine, is a unique individual with an unknown future, it also hints that

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ J. Radway, Reading the Romance, p.203.

women live lives characterized by identical conclusions.³² And to stand at the moment of resolution which the ending provides, is to stand in a present which has no future.

The textual strategies employed in romance narratives, some of which I mentioned above, suggest that reading is not work (Derrida talks of a process of 'textual labour' involved in reading) but pleasure. Although we need to keep open the spaces for psychic pleasure, we need also to note that such a view of reading denies the reading subject's ability to resist, invent, revise and understand the text's power and authority.³³ The romance narrative, Christine Bridgwood³⁴ has said, leads to resolution through heterosexual union which closes down the possibility of other desires and other narratives, and relegates women to a position beyond culture and history, in the realm of nature and truth. It is possible to see, then, that the question of women, and therefore of the woman reader, is integrally bound up with the question of language and symbolic functioning itself. In learning to read as women, we need to engage with the fictions which make us women, as well as the fictions we make.³⁵

³² E. Freund, The Return of the Reader, p.110.

³³ E. Freund, The Return of the Reader, p.110.

³⁴ Christine Bridgwood, 'Family romances: The contemporary popular family saga', in Jean Radford, The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction, Routledge, London 1986, p.167.

³⁵ Alison Light, 'Writing Fictions: Femininity in the 1950s', in Jean Radford, The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction, p.163.

In the second half of this section, I want to focus on some of the ways in which African romance fiction is being read. Although I retain the category 'African', I hope to interrogate the notion of 'Africanness' at the same time. African romance fiction differs in two very significant ways from the fiction considered in the first part of this study. Firstly, it appears to be written largely by men, its projected readership is largely male, and the few critical studies of popular romance fiction in Africa to date are also written by men. Secondly, love and marriage, because they appear to emphasize the individual's right to choose, are seen by these men, as readers and writers, as a force of liberation from the constraints of a traditional, communal society. In order, therefore, for an analysis of African romance fiction to be of use to this study of the woman reader of popular romance, the following questions will have to be tackled: 'How is African romance fiction being read?' and 'How are African women being read (not least by other women)?' As a consequence, we may then ask, 'How might African women read popular romance fiction?'. Minimal studies have been done on African popular readership but one of the few is a book by E. Obiechina, called An African Popular Literature.³⁶

Obiechina bases much of his study on the Onitsha Market pamphlet literature in Nigeria. Onitsha, the first educational and commercial base set up by missionaries and a point of contact between the hinterland and the Western regions of Nigeria, has

³⁶ E. Obiechina, An African Popular Literature, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1973.

been a lively centre of literary production for some time (although it has been less active since the civil war). Although some of the market pamphlets are educational, an overwhelming number deal with 'love situations and marriage'.³⁷

The idea of 'being in love', Obiechina argues, is essentially a Western one. In African tradition, any such notion is subordinated to familial and communal interests. Whereas the European 'knight' is rewarded through love and marriage to a desirable woman, the African 'knight' is 'endowed' with his 'lady' by the community in recognition of his manhood. The European couple attempt to become 'one body and one flesh' but the African 'couple' remain 'collaborative individuals', their autonomy protected and reinforced by the community.³⁸ Whereas the former implies a system of exchange in which the body becomes the site of the production of new meaning, the latter is presented as a depersonalised economic partnership. And indeed, a typical plot in African romance describes how a young man who starts life with nothing works very hard to improve his economic position, and just when he has almost succeeded, he falls in love with an unscrupulous, scheming woman who proceeds to strip him of all he has gained. Obiechina says, "Exploitation of individuals by those they are in love with is so commonplace that the pamphlet authors use their works to warn their readers against the dangers."³⁹ Relationships between men and women,

³⁷ Ibid., p.16.

³⁸ Ibid., p.71.

³⁹ Ibid., p.59.

then, are seen in economic terms: notions of exploitation and power are reduced to a material level.

From the above, it is possible to see that where communities depend for stability on the balancing of group relations and the linking of families in marriage alliances, intimacy established independently between men and women can be profoundly threatening. Notions of love and desire become a dangerous supplement to the social structure. But that that which is designated as marginal may in fact be central is perhaps evident when one considers Igbo custom and taboo, which prohibits young men from stepping over the out-stretched legs of young women. What more, then, is at stake?

Obiechina's study is grounded in the notion of 'progress'. Such a notion not only privileges the present as the point of greatest self-awareness,⁴⁰ but suggests that the construction of subjectivity is a question of history alone. He writes, for example, that the lessons taught by the Onitsha authors make young people cautious in their relationships. In other words, literature has the didactic function of exposing evil, and readers, as a consequence of their reading, set about improving their lives. Secondly, he says that the pamphlet literature deals with the problems of a changing society, and that "most of those at whom the literature is directed have had only a superficial contact with modern ways and are in need of

⁴⁰ J. Culler, On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1983, p.248.

guidance".⁴¹ Finally, he suggests that popular literature is a sign of a general awakening of which the novel is the highest achievement, and that literature for the masses spurs more 'sophisticated' writers to produce novels.

A closer reading of some of the texts produced at Onitsha reveals that far more is at issue. Authors often express their intention in prefaces to their works and N.O. Machu writes in the preface to Miss Rosy and the Romance of True Love, for example, "What the expressions 'I love you' and 'my dear' carry after them or when they come from the lips of a woman, can be found under the cover of this book".⁴² It is interesting, too, to consider some of the titles of the pamphlets: Why Boys Never Trust Money - Monger Girls; Beware of Harlot and Many Friends; Be Careful; Never Trust All That Love You; Salvation is Not Love.

The titles suggest the construction of a gendered subjectivity in which woman is designated as Other. This is a re-encounter with the castrating female sexuality of the harlot to be found in the history of British popular fiction. Richard Altick quotes Henry Kirk-White in the early nineteenth century: "The Muse who once dipped her hardy wing in the chastest dews of Castalia and spoke nothing but what had a tendency to confirm and invigorate the manly ardour of a virtuous mind, now breathes only the voluptuous languishing of the Harlot ... while it ravishes

⁴¹ E. Obiechina, An African Popular Literature, p.18.

⁴² Ibid., p.20.

the ear, [it] deludes and beguiles the sense".⁴³ The construction of the self, then, or the process of othering, is a complex one involving the question of female sexuality itself.

For men in the world of African romance, women are a dangerous excess in the construction of their selves as successful social subjects. As the romances designate 'woman', so critical responses to African romances designate the term 'African'.

In 1952, Amos Tutuola published his popular fiction novel The Palm Wine Drinkard which was read quite extensively in the West. The following is Chivuzo Ude's response in an article 'Publishing African Authors in America': "Tutuola's work conforms to the demands of the conditioned imagination. From his titles alone - The Palm Wine Drinkard and Feather Woman of the Jungle - you can imagine what the stories are about. All his stories are linked by a single pattern of the journey of the hero who acts out variants of the cycle of a mythical quest, a significant feature of folk mythology. Tutuola's latest works, therefore, because of their clear antecedents, probably could not be considered as novels".⁴⁴ Firstly, Ude's response, perhaps against his 'worse self', denies that the idea of the journey of the (folk) hero or heroine deeply affects us all and he attempts to distinguish Tutuola's work - the fictionalisation of the self in an imagined and fantastic medium - from the Real World of the

⁴³ Richard Altick, The English Common Reader, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1957, p.112.

⁴⁴ Chivuzo Ude, 'Publishing African Authors in America' in Translation, vol. 3, 1976, p.46.

Novel. Secondly, he implies that Tutuola's work is not truly African, or at least that he does not write in a valid way about African experience, when he goes on to say: "... some Africans have been embarrassed by the popularity of Tutuola, who they feel has given them - both writers and non-writers - a bad name".

Responses from white critics attempt to colonize the term 'African' in different ways. Charles Larson, writing on Lenrie Peters' The Second Round, which Larson calls a 'West African gothic', states, "In his depiction of the alienated African, Lenrie Peters has created a haunting story of one man's attempt to hide from the people and the culture around him... The literary image of the white trader who goes insane in Africa has ended... It is the African who goes mad now".⁴⁵ Larson attempts to contain the text within conventional narrative sequence and to impose a liberal humanist impulse on the writing, although the hero is 'alienated', and a sign of his individualism is madness. Madness and alienation are disempowered and designated as a generalised twentieth-century existentialist malady.

Another Western critic responds to Tutuola's work as follows: "A really accurate genre name for Tutuola's works would be 'naive romances': 'naive' to distinguish them from the more sophisticated romances of William Morris or perhaps Hawthorne".⁴⁶ Here African romance is designated as 'other', capable of infecting the purity of the genre itself. Obiechina himself has

⁴⁵ Charles Larson, The Emergence of African Fiction, Bloomington, London, 1971, p.241.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.8.

to some extent internalised such a view: he says, "... it is easy to see why in the pamphlet literature the attempts by individuals with their African backgrounds to express in European style their romantic love, falls far short of the ideal and appears somewhat ridiculous."⁴⁷

From this brief analysis of African popular romance fiction, it is possible to see the kinds of assumptions made about the terms 'African' and 'woman'. Firstly, particularly in the work of Obiechina, the possibility of a transparently authentic African self is posited. This is deeply entwined with the idea of an authentic African writing self. Obiechina says that while the pamphlet authors' vision is "obscured by the haze of inspired amorality", the 'intellectual authors' are able to "pierce through this haze and reveal the underlying realities".⁴⁸ He produces a picture, then, of the real African self writing about the Real World in Realist Novels. This strong self-image is in contrast to the 'othering' of 'African' according to a signifying system of hierarchical oppositions which designates 'African' as 'non-European'. Finally, there are brief moments in Obiechina's text when one glimpses a self divided against the self: where the self internalises the view of itself as other.

'Woman' is portrayed in African romance fiction as 'other'. She is represented either as a deviantly sexual harlot figure or as an acquiescent partner in a love relationship or marriage which is evaluated in economic terms. As a reader of romances,

⁴⁷ E. Obiechina, An African Popular Fiction, p.71.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.119.

she is expected to identify with the hero against the woman in the story, and to define her sexuality and femininity against that of the woman character. She is expected, that is to say, not to read as a woman, nor to engage with the question of her own sexual desire.

I want to look briefly at how two women writers have responded to the 'double-othering' which black women face. One is Lauretta Ngcobo, the other Carole Davies.

In the editor's note to her book Let It Be Told,⁴⁹ an anthology of essays by black women in Britain, Lauretta Ngcobo makes two significant statements: "I have kept criticism of individual writers to a minimum, feeling that their own essays will speak for them",⁵⁰ and, "what we see as differences between male and female writing may only be a manifestation of diversity in the richness of one black literature."⁵¹ She seems to suggest that there is some essential truth value in black women's writing, and that the differences between men and women's writing and, by implication, between men and women, may be attributed to a natural diversity. I would like to examine both points more closely.

In her introduction, Ngcobo writes, "We write about life as we live it. We are at a stage when we face the onerous task

⁴⁹ Lauretta Ngcobo, Let It Be Told, Virago, London, 1988.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.vii.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.ix.

of creating strong self images ...".⁵² On the one hand it would appear that black women's art is simply mimetic, and on the other that it is self-consciously involved in the task of creating fictions. In the introduction to Ngambika,⁵² Carole Davies argues that the first stage in what she terms 'African feminist criticism' has been, as in Western feminism, to examine images and recurrent representations of women (as glorified mothers, for example). She implies that to counter such images, women must be represented as 'strong' and she hails Ngugi as a writer who challenges patriarchy through the pictures he creates of strong, determined women "with a will to resist and to struggle".

To what extent, though, does the celebration of women and womanhood endorse dominant ideology? Although affirmation is needed, it seems that this too easily becomes the story of a feminist heroine, with too little attention to the ways in which stereotypes of femininity have been internalised. Secondly, awareness of oppression, a stereotype of feminism and class politics, can, in its one-dimensionality, create an identity, and absolve the subject from the guilt of an alienated consciousness.⁵³ Finally, in claiming the right to speak, women are uttering the as yet unspoken, and their words may therefore too easily be given status as truth. Ngcobo, says, for example,

⁵² Carole Davies, 'Introduction: Feminist Criticism and African Literary Criticism' in Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature, C. Davies and A. Graves, (eds), Trenton, Africa World Press, 1986.

⁵³ E. Wilson, 'Woman and Confessional Writing' in Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction, ed. S. Radstone, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1988, p.41.

that Buchi Emecheta "knows the hidden feelings of African women and she voices them as perhaps no-one has done before",⁵⁴ and that Grace Nichols "lives in her characters; she says things for them which they would not have been able to put into words for themselves ... she gives them language".⁵⁵

Lauretta Ngcobo states that exploitation by whites has "whittled away the traditional power of all men" and that this has affected the "whole ethos of family life",⁵⁶ and she goes on to discuss the 'African feminist' view of men. The treatment of men in the fiction of black women is "lenient",⁵⁷ and she attributes this to a sharing of the pain of racism, which is ultimately, for Ngcobo, the major cause of domestic troubles. The views of men expressed in the fiction, however, sharply contrast with those expressed verbally amongst black women which are "more virulent and open".⁵⁸ Black women choose to be protective of "their men" publicly however, because they do not want them "attacked by other women (particularly white women) or even grouped with other men for their sexism. At the root of this ambivalence is the question of inequality between the races."⁵⁹

⁵⁴ L. Ngcobo, Let It Be Told, p.8.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.5.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.29.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.30.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.31.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.31.

Ngcobo makes no real distinction between gender and race, and Davies, in defining 'African feminism' as 'hybrid', argues that its strength lies in its refusal to make a distinction between gender and race, "accepting both the balances and conflicts that go with twin acceptance".⁶⁰ It seems to me that this is an inadequate and false resolution, a glossing of the problems that gender, as distinct from race, raises, and the ways in which it structures our subjectivity. Racism is posited as the origin of 'domestic trouble' but what is the "traditional power of men" that it undermines, and what does the "ethos of the family" mean for women? What roles do these concepts assign to women, and what models of femininity are constructed as a consequence? Secondly, the notion of black women protecting black men from "other women (particularly white women)" is doubled-edged. Here, the idea of becoming a heroine (Ellen Kuzwayo writes, "The commitment of the women of my community is my commitment - to stand side by side with our menfolk ... in this long struggle to liberate ourselves")⁶¹ encloses women in a ritually retold story of racial oppression. The desire to play the role of protectors, or mothers, for black men may be deeply bound up with the desire for happy endings in their lives, in which the men of their community, continually claimed as 'our men', acknowledge and care for them.

⁶⁰ Carole Davies in Ngambika, p.13.

⁶¹ Ellen Kuzwayo, Call Me Woman, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1985, p.263.

The Smithton romance readers sought imaginative escape from the politics of dominance and subservience. Imaginative escape from the polarities of a language in which division and categorisation are the bases of perception, is, however, made little use of in black women's writing and criticism. There is, in the examples I have looked at above, an initial resistance to theory (Ngcobo suggests that the essays she includes speak for themselves), a tendency to treat some meanings as fully present ("The hidden feelings of Black women") and a failure, despite a demystification of impersonal processes of racial domination and continuing hegemony,⁶² to offer a way out for women, a way beyond, that is to say, the building of a canon of women's writing which attempts to chart and reflect women's experiences of oppression. A canon, however, is produced by an intersection of assumptions about reading legitimized in the privileging hierarchy of a patriarchal and metropolitan concept of literature and language. Creating 'strong images for women' potentially inverts the structures of domination, but it is the conditions of reading that need to be changed.

A radical reading would work to discourage the absolute distinction upon which hierarchial oppositions of self and other depend, and to challenge a system in which everything 'other' is appropriated and assimilated as a negative image of self. It would involve a process of textual labour in which the gaps and silences in the text are read as symptomatic, that is, as

⁶² B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths & H. Tiffin (eds), The Empire Writes Back, Routledge, London 1989, p.36.

speaking to us simultaneously of a resistance to, and a containment within, a normative femininity. Reading in this way, women can begin to tell their own stories, and the idea of the heroine can become richly suggestive. For we can begin to understand our fictions as fantasies - as the exploration and production of desires which may be in excess of the socially possible and acceptable.

PART II

In this section, I analyse examples of romance writing. I look at a selection of Mills and Boon and Harlequin texts, probably the two largest publishers of romance and the romances most widely read both by the Smithton women in Janice Radway's study and by black women readers I interviewed in South Africa (see Part III). Each publisher produces a set of sub-genres and I have chosen examples of some of the different kinds available ('Silhouette Desire' and 'Silhouette Special Edition' are both published by Harlequin, for example).

Arlette, the heroine of Cajun Summer⁶³ is a geol^{og}ist who does field work on an oil rig. She, like all the heroines in the romances I read, takes on a job usually associated with men. Star, in Flame of the East⁶⁴ undertakes a journey across the Moroccan desert, Eve oversees a boatyard (Some Enchanted Evening)⁶⁵ and Molly is the curator of a modern art museum (Summer Light).⁶⁶ In addition, the heroines display a strong impulse towards independence: "independence was a cause, almost an emotional necessity";⁶⁷ "if she sacrificed herself, then she would no longer exist to love him. He would possess only the

⁶³ Maura Seger, Cajun Summer, Silhouette Desire (Harlequin), London, 1986.

⁶⁴ Julia Fitzgerald, Flame of the East, Futura, London, 1986.

⁶⁵ Jenny Arden, Some Enchanted Evening, Mills and boon, Richmond, 1988.

⁶⁶ Jude O'Neill, Summer Light, Silhouette Special Edition, (Harlequin), Richmond, 1988.

⁶⁷ Jenny Arden, Some Enchanted Evening, p.12.

shell of a woman instead of the complete person she was now";⁶⁸ "Love and marriage meant chains and restrictions and making a home, having children, being tied to one place, not being able to travel, and all the other things she dreaded."⁶⁹ The heroines show an initial impulse towards an autonomous individuality, a desire that is likely to be shared by the reader. By the end of the stories, though, a sexual division of labour in which women are relegated to the domestic sphere, is secured firmly in place.

The reader is prepared for this 'transformation' when the heroines, as they are falling in love, make statements which their actiones are clearly about to refute: "no man would ever again breach the citadel of her independence";⁷⁰ "no man would ever get within emotional reach of her again. She hated and mistrusted the whole sex."⁷¹ It is not that the heroine does not tell the truth about herself, but rather that she remains virtuous in the eyes of the hero and the reader because she remains ignorant and confused about things which the reader clearly comprehends.

The heroines' statements about their sexuality are similarly proved wrong. They do not allow for the passionate sexual urges which they go on to feel and so they project a disabling myth of independence which leaves out sexual desire or make a protest

⁶⁸ Maura Seger, Cajun Summer, p.121.

⁶⁹ Julia Fitzgerald, Flame of the East, p.71.

⁷⁰ Jenny Arden, Some Enchanted Evening, p.39.

⁷¹ Ibid., p.144.

against marriage and domesticity which leaves out sexual needs. In Some Enchanted Evening, Eve tells Zack, "I'm already beyond your reach"⁷² but later finds, "His fierce passion had completely shattered her own notions about her sexuality, making her discover such wild, tempestuous desires in herself that she couldn't attempt to match them with other facets of her personality."⁷³ When Julian picks up Arlette and strides into the bedroom in Cajun Summer, she thinks, "she really ought to say something, point out that she wasn't simply a toy to be used for his amusement, but her words stuck in her throat. They simply could not stand up against the sheer force of her need for him."⁷⁴

The heroine's sexual desire makes her vulnerable to the hero: "As she lay naked on the bed before him, a shiver of anxiousness ran through her. She felt almost unbearably vulnerable, yet she could not bring herself to make the slightest effort to protect herself"⁷⁵ and "No longer being disadvantaged by being half-naked with him, she put up a good show of answering his queries competently".⁷⁶ When she expresses ambiguity about sex, or even anger at the hero, he uses her display of passion to undermine her: "You can respond to me like that and still

⁷² Ibid., p.39.

⁷³ Ibid., p.153.

⁷⁴ Maura Seger, Cajun Summer., p.161.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.156.

⁷⁶ Jenny Arden, Some Enchanted Evening, p.77.

suggest that I'd have to rape you?";⁷⁷ "Let me go", she demanded, "I don't want to be near you"/"You liked it fine until now" he reminded her;⁷⁸ "You call it rape when you kiss me the way you do? ... Now tell me you don't love me ... You belong to me Eve and you're going to admit it.";⁷⁹ "You love what I make you feel. If there's any love between us, that's where it lies".⁸⁰ Finally, Eve, in Some Enchanted Evening, feels impotent against her desire: "what made her angriest of all was the intuitive comprehension that if Zack ever did take her, he would make sure she enjoyed it."⁸¹

When the heroine expresses anger, her anger is eroticised. Zack (Some Enchanted Evening) says, "I don't know what turns me on more, your sudden flashes of temper or those cool provoking looks"⁸² and Eve finds that "some intuitive sense of self-preservation warned her that losing her temper might be a naked spark in the energy field of sexual tension that pulsed between them."⁸³ The heroine's own desire makes her complicit in the eroticisation of force and violence: when the hero in Cajun Summer calls the heroine a liar and pushes her against a wall, "the erotic images his words conjured up made her feel unbearably

⁷⁷ Maura Seger, Cajun Summer, p.116.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.114.

⁷⁹ Jenny Arden, Some Enchanted Evening, p.149.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.83.

⁸¹ Jenny Arden, Some Enchanted Evening, p.149.

⁸² Ibid., p.83.

⁸³ Ibid., p.110.

weak. All too easily she could see herself as his helpless slave, utterly subject to his will."⁸⁴

Female sexuality is given expression in romances, but in order to secure n^ruturance and security, the heroine must avoid threatening the hero with an overdemanding sexuality and her sexual desire must be confined to the marriage bed. Although most heroines have sex before marriage, it is clear that having had sex with the hero, they will marry him. Early on in Flame of the East, Star feels she might "throw away her defenses and regret it for the rest of her life"⁸⁵ and after having lost her virginity she wishes that she had not taken "the irretrievable step of the night before".⁸⁶ Maggie (One Reckless Moment) takes flight because if she stayed "it would be contemptibly easy for Nick to persuade her into his bed".⁸⁷ In the early stages of their relationship in particular, heroines take care to curb the passions they feel: Eve finds that "in a moment's feverish madness her fingers entangled in the crisp hair at the nape of his neck before a shocked realisation of what she was doing made her push against his shoulders"⁸⁸ and Maggie feels her "traitorous"⁸⁹ body aching to touch Nick's and doesn't want to be

⁸⁴ Maura Seger, Cajun Summer, p.114.

⁸⁵ Julia Fitzgerald, Flame of the East p.60.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.71.

⁸⁷ Jeanne Allan, One Reckless Moment, Mills and boon, Richmond, 1988 p.73.

⁸⁸ Jenny Arden, Some Enchanted Evening p.28.

⁸⁹ Jeanne Allan, One Reckless Moment, p.44.

caught in the act of watching him.

Although the heroines find that they cannot control their bodies as well as their minds, they also experience ambiguous feelings about sex. Arlette in Cajun Summer experiences melancholy, apprehension, confusion and dislocation, feeling herself "somewhere between single and married, in uncharted territory where hidden dangers lurked".⁹⁰ The following interchange is characteristic of many:

Julian: Is love that important to you?

Arlette: No... yes. I don't know.

Julian: So you'd like to forget it all, would you?

Arlette: Perhaps.⁹¹

The hero shows little sympathy in these moments, but despite this, the reader is led to believe that he does love and care for the heroine. Descriptions of his masculinity or his violent nature are tempered by some indication of gentleness or softness: "Even as he pressed against her, making her vividly aware that their struggles had aroused him, she was dimly conscious of his hands behind her back, protecting her from contact with the sharp moulding".⁹² Detecting such moments, the reader can believe in the possibility of the hero's transformation. It is up to the heroine, however, to draw out these qualities in the hero: she must learn to read him 'properly'. The hero might assist her in this task - "I might appear ungrateful at times, and

⁹⁰ Maura Seger, Cajun Summer, p.107.

⁹¹ Ibid., p.114.

⁹² Ibid., p.115.

inconsiderate, but I'm not really. I find it very difficult to show my feelings, you know... It won't be easy revealing my heart to you"⁹³ - so that by the end of the book the heroine can say, "You're not the man I covered in powder at the airport!"⁹⁴ In One Reckless Moment, Nick accuses Maggie of "throwing your body at every man in the room like some kind of slut",⁹⁵ and follows this with a phallic gesture: "He stalked closer and outlined the deep V of her dress with a stiff finger".⁹⁶ She reads him thus: "Something had happened to hurt him, to cause him to lash out at her in her pain and distress".⁹⁷

The heroine learns to reinterpret the hero's actions, and this allows the reader to believe in the possibility of transforming the dissatisfactions she feels in her relationship through sustained effort on her part. The hero may sleep with other women - "As she watched, Zack Barclay's head came down and his mouth claimed Sally's, just as he had claimed Star's only a day or two ago"⁹⁸ but, the heroine believes, he does not love these women. If she offers him love, his 'fear of emotional involvement with women' (the only women friends the heroines ever have turn out to be 'calculating' or evil) will be broken down and he will begin to love her.

⁹³ Julia Fitzgerald, Flame of the East, p.147.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p.154.

⁹⁵ Jeanne Allan, One Reckless Moment, p.177.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p.178.

⁹⁸ Julia Fitzgerald, Flame of the East, p.48.

As readers, we know that the heroine will succeed in this task because we are presented early on with evidence of her skills as a nurturer. In Summer Light, Wiley notices Molly's treatment of her fiancé's daughter: "there was something about the way she's attended so automatically to Victoria that impressed him";⁹⁹ Zack says to Eve, "I had no idea you were so good with children";¹⁰⁰ Nick commends Maggie with "You knew just what to do with those children".¹⁰¹ Finally, when Zack gets sick in the desert in Flame of the East, Star nurses him, and "he needed her now. He was baring his heart to her, and from his earlier arrogance, she had never thought that would be possible. And the heart she saw bared was the one she could treasure and hold close to her own..."¹⁰² In all the books but one that I read, the heroine's mother has died and the task of looking after her brothers and sisters and/or her father, has fallen to the heroine. In Cajun Summer, Arlette does have a mother, and in Summer Light, the romance between hero and heroine is deeply entwined with her mother, although she has died. I look briefly at each example below.

After her father and her boyfriend Julian have left on a crocodile hunting trip, Arlette's mother notices that Arlette is feeling unloved and sad and says to her, "if you need someone to talk to, perhaps another woman, I hope that you remember that I'm

⁹⁹ Maura Seger, Cajun Summer, p.22.

¹⁰⁰ Jenny Arden, Some Enchanted Evening, p.171.

¹⁰¹ Jeanne Allan, One Reckless Moment, p.161.

¹⁰² Maura Seger, Cajun Summer, p.140.

here",¹⁰³ and they begin talking. Her mother tells her how she 'won' her father by getting herself pregnant by him ("How did you manage it?"/Her mother shot her a very womanly glance "How do you think?")¹⁰⁴ Arlette says that her situation is more complicated because she is trying to have a career as well as a relationship with Julian. Her mother advises her that "no amount of achievement in any area is really worthwhile unless it can be shared."¹⁰⁵ Much later, when Arlette has taken a job on an oil rig which means spending time away from Julian she finds "the more control she had over her own life, the more she longed for him, to fully share it with him."¹⁰⁶ She gives up her job and considers the possibility of working for her husband sometime in the future. A heroine who starts out with a slight 1980's progressivism turns out as a daughter of the past.

In Summer Light , Molly Proctor is torn between the 'complexity' of the art world and the security of traditional family life. This manifests itself as a choice between the two men in her life, one of whom is a painter who lives in a loft with no pension and one suit. Her mother was a famous painter (although nobody in her current circle knows that she is Molly's mother) who neglected her as a child. She describes a childhood of falling asleep in cafés in Paris, her mother not caring enough to exercise restraint. She is also illegitimate. Because her

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.124.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.125.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p.128.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.135.

mother left her to take care of herself emotionally, she relishes the prospect of a 'real family' of her own and therefore pursues her relationship with Greg. At a retrospective exhibition of her mother's work, Wiley, the artist and other man that she is attracted to, 'explains' one of her mother's paintings to her:

"Can't you see the regret in every sweep of the brush? ... Art was found wanting in the end, compared with life itself. Even though she dedicated herself to it, loved it more than anything in her life - maybe even more than you, as painful as that is. Perhaps women of her generation felt that they needed to make that choice, I don't know. But I do know one thing: she regretted it.¹⁰⁷ And all of her regretted it - the person and the artist."¹⁰⁷

Molly, upset and jealous that Wiley has brought his old girlfriend to the exhibition opening, thinks,

"Regret. What a horrible word. It rang in her head like a funeral bell, signifying love and loss, the terror of being too late. Would she, Molly wondered numbly, turn out to be her mother's daughter after all?"¹⁰⁸

A few pages on, Sam, Molly's employer and a 'father figure' in her life, tells her that he is her father. Overjoyed, she feels that her whole life "has clicked into place",¹⁰⁹ that she "now had her own new family to discover"¹¹⁰ and that she "became a daughter again".¹¹¹ When Sam hugs her, her response is this: "For the first time since she was a child, she felt the strength of her

¹⁰⁷ Jude O'Neill, Summer Light, p.219.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.220.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.227.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p.228.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p.226.

mother's love. Her mother had sent her this man, had made sure that they were part of each other's lives."¹¹²

I suggested above that many romance heroines aspire to autonomy and individuality through their choice of 'male' careers. Identification with, and desire for, the father and all that is male leads the daughter, when she finds out that her mother prefers people like her father who have penises, to desire one for herself in order to secure her mother's love. Penis envy, identification with the father and admiration of the male are simultaneous expressions of a wish to assert her independence and of her love for, and desire to win back, the mother she has begun to relinquish.¹¹³ The heroines display deep ambivalence about their mothers, even where the mother is absent through death: they want to be separate and different, but they also experience their mother as an extension of themselves. This is Nancy Chodorow's 'self-in-relation' which, because it involves providing for the needs of others (either husband or child), serves to reinforce a sense of identity, and to deplete it at the same time.¹¹⁴ Men, because they are nurtured solely by women, tend to define themselves in explicit opposition to anything female.

¹¹² Ibid. p.

¹¹³ Janice Radway, Reading the Romance, Verso, London, 1987, p.136.

¹¹⁴ Nancy Chodorow (The Reproduction of Mothering), quoted in Janice Radway, Reading the Romance, p.136.

In Summer Light, Wiley says to Molly, "I'm not your mother"¹¹⁵ when she expresses her fear that artists are self-sufficient and don't need other people. Although he means to suggest that he does need her, his words also imply that he cannot be a surrogate mother for her, and that she has to resolve her relationship with her mother before the two of them can be happy together. He makes a weak and expedient attempt, through interpreting her mother's painting as a sign of regret at not committing herself to a love relationship with a man, at regaining Molly's mother for her, symbolically. This only genuinely happens through her father, however, who simultaneously replaces her mother and makes her feel that she is her mother's daughter. Molly, however, chooses to see Wiley as the man who fulfils both these object roles.

The 'women's knowledge' that Arlette and her mother share in Cajun Summer, is of a self-in-relation. Although this is defined unequivocally as a self in relation to a man, the fact that mother and daughter talk about it works to emphasize the relationship between the two women. This relationship is repressed in the book as a whole, however, since there is no evidence of them speaking or being alone together again.

If the romance heroine's identity is an identity in relation, then her identity is deeply bound up with a relationship with a man. In Cajun Summer, when Julian and Arlette meet again after four years, he asks her: "This new role of yours -

¹¹⁵ Jude O'Neill, Summer Light, p.193.

geologist - is it everything you hoped?"¹¹⁶ She says evasively, "Is anything ever?", and by the end of the book she admits, "I know I was wrong to fear becoming dependent on you. Worse, I was lying to myself to even think it was possible to avoid doing so ... I felt driven to prove to you that I was a strong, capable person in my own right."¹¹⁷ The hero, on the other hand, never openly declares his dependence on the heroine, and so preserves his autonomous masculinity.¹¹⁸ He continues to show moments of sensitivity, but we do not see any process of transformation occurring in him.

Julia Fitzgerald, author of Flame of the East, is described at the front of the book as follows:

"Julia Fitzgerald was brought upon the Yorkshire Moors which, she says, inspired her with their wild beauty. Her passion for history first showed itself through art, when she would spend hours painting queens and princesses in historical costume. She wrote her first historical novel at seventeen, though she had begun writing short stories when she was six".¹¹⁹

Throughout her book, the author makes allusions to romantic novel reading, named as "historical" novel reading. For example, "it was the sort of kiss that she had read about";¹²⁰ "Perhaps he wasn't so unlike the valorous and intrepid heroes in the historical novels she loved"¹²¹ and "Imagine this is a scene from

¹¹⁶ Maura Seger, Cajun Summer, p.37.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.182.

¹¹⁸ Janice Radway, Reading the Romance, p.148.

¹¹⁹ Julia Fitzgerald, Flame of the East, no page number.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p.60.

¹²¹ Ibid., p.67.

one of those raunchy novels I've seen you reading".¹²² A storytelling cycle is set up between writer and reader in which the writer understands the conventions of romantic storytelling and the significance of romance as an archetypal event in a woman's life. Just as there is a strong connection between the description of the author's life and the story she tells, so there is one between the heroine's life and lives of heroines in the books she reads. The imaginary world is congruent with the real world and therefore dominated by events that may occur in real life, it is suggested. At the same time, the storytelling cycle set up between author and reader, heroine and heroine, must involve the re-telling of the same story.

One of the chapters in Flame of the East ends like this:

"Somewhere beneath the kissing and the romancing .. they were as different from one another as black from white, and neither of them had any way of closing the gap. It stretched between them, wide and insurmountable, and there was nothing she could do about it."¹²³

Such an ending would seem to imply a good deal of narrative suspension, tension or open-endedness, but any anxiety or contingency the reader may feel is immediately put to rest by other narrative strategies. The novel belongs to a sub-series called 'Astromance' and in the foreword, the author states that astrology is "the key to all human understanding".¹²⁴ Each chapter is prefaced by a prediction under the star sign of the

¹²² Ibid., p.61.

¹²³ Ibid., p.107.

¹²⁴ Ibid., (Foreword - no page number).

hero and heroine. The final gesture in the attempt to ensure a water-tight narrative is the name of the heroine: Star.

Despite an apparent accession to the threat of the unknown, the narrative strategies employed reassure the reader that the events that she expects to happen will finally occur. The use of a star prediction is both particularly reassuring and perilously close to a suggestion of a pre-determined existence which women are fated to live out. The author insists that her novels are historical and that her own "passion" has been for history. Janice Radway found in her study that women readers placed very high value on what romances taught them about history ("faraway places" and "other cultures").¹²⁵ The information they got from the books they read gave them, they felt, something to show (in a society in which information is a highly valued commodity) - to their husbands, for example - for their investment, through time and money, in the books. Flame of the East gives descriptions of Moroccan life in some detail, and the romantic encounter is set against the ancient shrine of queen Merek-Mose, a shrine to "love and lost hopes"¹²⁶ in which Star has a vision of King Mohamed Zaphir, only he has the face of Zack Barclay, the hero of her story. Historical specificity (or what appears to be such) is produced on the one hand, and a timeless, mythical, fairy tale space on the other. History is used to authenticate this version of the mythic story, and a knowledge of history 'authenticates' the author herself.

¹²⁵ Janice Radway, Reading the Romance, p.111.

¹²⁶ Julia Fitzgerald, Flame of the East, p.46.

Written in 1986, Flame of the East's references to 'stories' may well be an oblique response to developments in feminist literary theory. It refers to the stories that we create and that create us only to recontain them in the romance narrative. The allusion to stories and fictions comes dangerously close to a view of the world in which social and gender identities are constructs and may therefore be changed, and this may explain the language of astronomy - of, that is, an autonomous system of meaning - that this particular book employs. In a final gesture to stay narrative insecurity, the book lists, before the story begins, successful 'real life' examples of the hero and heroine's star signs. Linda Evans, it tells us, is a Sagittarian, as was William Blake, and a Scorpio who stands testimony to the possibility of happy endings in our lives is Margaret Thatcher.

PART III

In this section I offer an account of four interviews which I conducted recently amongst black women readers in South Africa. The interviews form part of a larger project which looks at reading strategies employed by black women readers in South Africa and Namibia. Below I include those parts of four of the interviews in which the women discuss their romance reading or in which romance reading has clearly informed their reading habits.

Research across racial divides in an apartheid context always faces the possibility of being seen as an instrument of oppression and hence the non-cooperation of the participants. The discussions I had with the women I interviewed, however, were on the whole extraordinarily open. Not only were they willing to talk but they appeared to enjoy the opportunity of talking about themselves and their lives. In many cases the participants held discussions amongst themselves and those women who asked me about my own 'credentials' often yielded the most extensive interview transcripts.

The participants in the interviews have completed their schooling and most of them have some further training. Several of the women have university degrees (in this sense, they are not 'representative' of the majority of black women in South Africa, but I do not aim to provide quantitative data nor to deal with the issue of literacy). Although I refer to the accounts below as 'case studies', I offer a discourse analysis rather than a data analysis. Most sociological studies in South Africa have

allowed personal accounts to "speak for themselves" (Elsa Joubert's Poppie Nongena and the CIIR's Vukani makhosikasi: South African Women Speak, for example): people's words are given status as truth, and particularly the words of women who, as often silenced subjects in a patriarchal context, are seen to utter the "as yet unspoken". I try to move away from the assumption implicit in such studies that the subject provides the limit and unity of experience and that consciousness is the origin and determinant of meaning and history.

CASE STUDY I

Mpho Jivhuho works for 'Telesales' in the advertising department of The Star newspaper in Johannesburg. During her day she receives telephone calls from people wishing to place advertisements in the paper, she re-contacts past advertisers, she canvases companies for new advertisements, and she processes details of layout and design for the Works Department. Her job description requires that she, amongst other things, "Answer calls promptly and in a way that represents the company in the best light" and "assist caller with wording of advert which will best benefit caller". During her working day, then, Mpho participates in a world of image-making, a world in which both people and words are malleable and meanings are commodified. She is engaged, one might say, in a kind of fiction-making.

Mpho is twenty-one years old, has a university education and is unmarried. She is extremely confident and articulate and holds opinions on a wide range of subjects. She reads a great

deal of fiction, as well as magazines, although she claims that she has never bought a book in her life because "I can just never part with the money to buy a book". She describes herself as a romantic and as being easily influenced by others, and offers this as an explanation for the fact that she so enjoys Mills and Boons romances. She qualifies this by saying that although she still reads romances occasionally (particularly when she feels she's been "very intellectual" for a while), other books she has read have helped her to discover what she hates about romances - that they allow her to "conjure up a whole little world ... they deceived me - I thought life really was like that. You see yourself as a romantic, and who wants to be a romantic in a world like this?"

Pinky Khoabane, like Mpho, has had a university education. Her job in the Advertising Department entails greater responsibility than Mpho's job. She must "assist colleagues where necessary", provide "market feed back to section Head and Management" and "achieve individual and group sales target." Brought up in Lesotho, she is twenty five years old, single and now lives in Hillbrow, a mixed area in central Johannesburg. In the interview, she is firm, precise and has an excellent command of English. She is very socially conscious and this is reflected in her reading: she reads newspapers extensively each day, as well as Time and Newsweek each week. She reads less and less fiction, not only because of lack of time but also because she does not find it satisfying (she talks with great vigour and enthusiasm about the romances she used to read, however). She

buys a newspaper to read on the bus home because she can't bear "the idea of just listening to mothers and what they cooked last night and Jimmy crying out..."

Almost from the beginning, the interview takes the form of a discussion in which Mpho and Pinky address one another as well as addressing me and unlike subsequent interviews I conducted, they feel free to disagree with one another and to articulate independent opinions. The following interchange, although not directly about romance reading, provides an important context for the discussion on romances which follows from it. The women discuss two different ways of reading:

Mpho: When I'm reading - not like when I'm talking and I can say "you're talking junk" - it's me and myself and I can conjure up a whole little world.

Pinky: That's why I don't like fiction.

Interviewer: Why? Do you think it's just fantasy?

Pinky: I just ... I don't know.
You know, once I've read the first few chapters then I go to the end, but I never go straight to the end.

Mpho: I never do that. I might as well not read the book.

Pinky: You know, there was a lady yesterday who is getting married tomorrow and she had a present yesterday and someone said she mustn't open it until tomorrow, and I asked her, "Are you going to do it?" and she said "Yes". Gee, by my

standards it's quite perfect to open it now. Even with a book, I read the last paragraph to see what happens and I'm on my way.

Mpho: I think that's why in life I can be so disappointed. I build and build and build and build something ...

Pinky: You see

Mpho: ... so much so that in the end it's an anti-climax.

Pinky: See, that's why I want to get to the end quickly.

Mpho: It's like, if you give me a present and a card, I'll take my time opening the card and think about what the other person was thinking about when they bought it for me, the connotations.

Pinky: N...n...oo! You really are romantic, I don't have the time, I quickly get to the point. There's not a single book I've never finished - I must read it, even if it takes me a year. After I've read the end I go back - I just cannot wait to finish, but I will finish. The most boring books will take me months on end, but I will finish it. I can be bored, bored, bored, but I'll go back and be depressed by a book. Maybe somewhere in the next line there'll be something interesting: I'll go back and find out.

Mpho is aware of the dangers of losing herself in a world where there are no interlocutors, a world in which she can omnipotently create the characters, or author the text. In communion with

fictional worlds, she can lose touch with the world she must inhabit. Pinky, with her concern for the political issues which her society faces and her desire for factual information, rejects this other-worldly quality of fiction. This rejection is linked with her intense need to secure meaning. By reading the ending of books before she reads the books themselves, she desires to secure the correct meanings in place, to produce a final identity which can explain all the details in the story which has preceded it. Having secured this, she can go back and read the book in the knowledge that the discontinuity between signifier and signified that she experiences is temporary and not fundamental. Only when she has opened the present, as it were, can she begin to ponder it and derive pleasure from it. Her insistence on always finishing a book, however much it bores her, seems to fit in with this: not finishing a book, even a book whose ending you have already read, is leaving it incomplete, "open-ended". Perhaps she has a sense of an elusive language which continually escapes meaning, a narrative closure which never quite manages to contain the meanings of the text. This may explain her determined "I will read it" and her vigilant "maybe somewhere in the next line there'll be something interesting". Perhaps it may also have something to do with her own sense of duty, or dislike of leaving a task incompleting: the act and the investment as well as the textual transaction are important, I think.

Soon after the exchange above, we begin to discuss romances, and Pinky and Mpho both become highly animated and excited. Pinky, recalling her romance reading days, says she "couldn't

read anything else" and how in the same week she could re-read a Mills and Boon because it was so easy to understand and because "it related to life". Mpho, who still reads romances, adds that of all the books she reads, Mills and Boons are the ones that she can go back to and re-read. Between them, the women make distinctions between different types of romances - they dislike Barbara Cartland's books, for example, because "her idea of romance is too submissive for a woman - I mean, she just makes women willow away in self misery until this charming prince comes along and hey presto ...". In Mills and Boons romances, on the other hand, "The woman fights the emotion and in the end succumbs, and lo and behold he is there". When Pinky says that she has heard of a Mills and Boon in which the "women is on top", Mpho is "so upset" whereas Pinky is pleased because it may mean that attitudes to women are changing.

For both Mpho and Pinky, romances are fantasies and they contain information about the real world (Pinky says in the same sentence that the books "bring lovely thoughts" and that they "relate to life"). Janice Radway explains this as follows: although romance readers know that the stories are improbable, they also find that the world that serves as a backdrop for these stories is congruent with their own. Consequently, they believe strongly in the autonomous reality of the fictional world. Due to the assumed congruence of the two worlds, things that readers learn about the fictional universe are received as "fact" or

"information" - as knowledge, that is, applicable to the world of day to day existence.¹²⁷

Although this is a highly convincing explanation, Radway is nevertheless talking about a community of American housewives. More difficult to account for is the fact that women respond so similarly to the same romance stories in an African context, albeit an urbanised and westernised one. One thing that does seem clear is that romance reading is less a matter of the aesthetic quality of the books themselves than about the extra-literary desires and needs of the women who read them. This is evident from Pinky and Mpho's comments about Barbara Cartland verses Mills and Boon romances, and from Mpho's desire that the formula for the traditional romance relationship remain untouched. Nevertheless, this doesn't fully account for the degree of confluence between women romance readers in Smithton, America and in Johannesburg, South Africa, and I will return to this question at a later stage.

Both women think that characters in books are "not at all similar" to people they meet in real life, and they find that heroines' reactions and feeling towards people and events are not like theirs at all. They find, however that heroes' emotional response to heroines resembles their experience of the way men relate to women. It is difficult to know how to interpret this. To see men as similar to heroes in books is both to see them as a source of escape from the self, or of the mending of a

¹²⁷ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance*, Verso, London, 1987, p.188.

fragmented self (Nancy Chodorow argued that women experience their self as a "self in relation", a relationality expressed either through mothering or through a relationship with a man) and to see their responses and actions as proceeding according to an identifiable pattern, as predictable. The message in romance stories incorporates both aspects: if women learn to read recurrent male responses properly (which is what romance reading teaches them to do) then they can create the possibility of their own happiness through a successful relationship with a man.

Pinky likes a hero to be independent, adding "I love independent men. He mustn't think I'm going to iron his bloody shirts for him". Mpho chooses "a sense of humour" above "independence" in the questionnaire saying, "I hate independent men ... some guys could die without ever having a woman in his life - I hate emotionally independent men". Mpho imagines a world in which men need, and don't leave, women, a world in which people are like fictional characters ("... it's nice when you meet a well read guy because then you can start saying, "oh yes, you remind me of a character I read in a book"). On the other hand, she has a clear understanding of the textuality of "reality" itself. She says,

"I've always thought that well-read people are open-minded. If you came up with a new idea or something, it's almost like it's another book to them. Every person is a book, every event is a book: They take it, they read it, they digest it, they go over it again ... if women themselves realised the potential of reading, it would emancipate them ..."

Pinky, on the other hand, resolutely sees a world in which women must service men ("iron their bloody shirts"), a "reality" which

precludes women from fiction and, implicitly, fiction-making. Of herself she says "Reading [fiction] has ceased to be a priority for me now ... what's going on around me, that I must know". Yet Pinky does read a lot of fiction and her reading patterns betray a desire to capture meaning as quickly as possible to arrest a reality that may be open-ended and potentially meaningless. If anything, she fears that fiction will alienate her too disturbingly from the reality of her life (in the middle of a sentence about lending books to friends who don't return them, she makes a comment about alcohol, which seems to function as an analogy for reading fiction: "What is bad about alcohol is that you just escape and escape until you get to a point where you don't want to be in ordinary life any more"). Both Mpho and Pinky fear the consequences of escaping into a world of romance which highlights the degree of disparity between their real and imagined existences. It may be this that distinguishes them from Radway's Smithton women.

CASE STUDY II

My discussion with Thabile, Sanezisiwe, Nomsa and Lee at the University of Natal campus in Pietermaritzburg was animated and lengthy. The women, who had all completed a first degree and were studying for a Diploma of Education, were working on an urbanisation project in the Economics department to earn money during their vacation. They were eager to participate in the interview, sometimes all talking at once; eager to tell their story. They also functioned strongly as a group, "building" upon

one another's responses. Although they voiced differences from one another, consensus was sometimes too easily reached, one opinion too easily moulded or compromised to fit the general direction that the discussion was taking.

At high school the women read, and still read, Mills and Boon romances. Another favourite were the photo love-comics whose special advantage, Sanezisiwe says, was that "I could actually see the story". Mills and Boon romances themselves come close to treating language as a 'verbal photograph', a transparent medium for replicating reality. (Simple syntactic structure ensures that signs are easily understood, and minimal ambiguity avoids attention to the signs themselves and the possibility that they are not simple referential gestures). The women value romances for the "information" they provide about "real" life and because they are quick to read and easy to understand. Their romance reading was part of an attempt to understand men - living in sex-segregated hostels at boarding school, they wanted to "know about romances, about boys", and even to communicate with men: writing letters to "so-called boyfriends" involved copying out "well written paragraphs" from the romances they read.

The women's present reading habits reflect a continuation of qualities they most liked in romances. The speed with which texts can be read and the degree to which they appear to yield information are important criteria in their reading. Thabile says "Novels are too big for me" and Nomsa and Lee read newspapers and magazines prolifically because they are short and

because magazines "help to solve a problem". There is a certain nostalgia about their romance reading and a degree of resistance to ending it (Sanezisiwe says, "I could read so many stories a day - even now, I could go and look at them"). The 'innocence' of the romance story, in which meaning is secured outside the movement of language, is pitted against the 'experience' of other books in which a slippage between words and their meanings is more likely to appear. Whereas in romances language is viewed as a system of values for things which "truly exist", other texts are more likely to betray the fact that the reader actively constructs meaning.

Although the women spoke about the construction of the reading self as ideological, either this has not been internalised or they deliberately want to avoid a view of language as a system of historically and culturally relative codes. Lee says that she has learnt to "trust" Sidney Sheldon. His books, she explains, are the only ones in which she doesn't have to read the ending first because she knows "that the books will be good", she knows what to expect. Sheldon is a disappointment to Sanezisiwe, however: her friends encourage her to read his books and then she finds they are "unrealistic - I mean in real life they cannot happen, and then I just get discouraged". When I ask whether that ever happened with the romance stories she read, she replies emphatically "Oh, no way!". In a world where Mills and Boons are more real than virtually any other books, the relationship between the real and the fictional becomes extremely difficult to unravel. Apart from the example that Lee provides, all the

women compulsively read the endings of books first. For Sanezisiwe this is a particularly intense need: She "cannot bear not to know the ending" and even if she is going to watch a film on television, she tries to find somebody who has seen it so that she can establish how it ends.

When Nomsa and Lee talk about a book they enjoyed on their school syllabus at high school, however, their response highlights the way in which they, as readers, actively collaborated in the production of textual meaning. Nomsa says of Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles:

this book has a message for women - in the sense that you can't go on trusting everyone you meet, just like she trusted Clare. As women we've got to be very careful of ourselves.

The women produce an interpretation of Hardy's novel that bears meaning in their own context. Distance between author and reader, and heroine and reader, is destroyed, which brings a new freedom for the reader: she may enter the world of the novel as if it were her own. The boundaries between her own life and the life of the novel become blurred. Reading is marked as "work" (the women work to produce the book's meaning in a contemporary context), as opposed to the pleasure that romance reading brings.

When I ask the women to elaborate on the "message for women" they see in Tess, Saneziswe explains:

Guys are liars. Maybe it doesn't apply to you, but black guys ... try to boost our egos through manipulating women ... you know, umm - it's hard - you anticipate ... what? ... problems in the future. You don't enter into the relationship whole-heartedly, you just say, "Oh God, he's going to do this to me". We were just talking about it one day with my friend Pinky. She said she thought it's maybe because they've been ill-treated at work, they're frustrated. The best thing they can do is boost their ego,

to hit back - through woman, he can see that he's a man. He can do something which shows he's masculine".

"Through woman he can see that he's a man": I argued in Part I how, in Laretta Ngcobo's writing, class and racial oppression are posited as explanations for 'domestic trouble' at the expense of oppression across gender. Ngcobo, Pinky and Sanezisiwe all retroactively interpret black men's behaviour: they learn to 'read' men, thus avoiding the demand that male behaviour change.

The women face disapproval from men when they read. It is less the kinds of books that they read that causes male resentment than the activity itself and its capacity to absorb the women's attention. Sanezisiwe explains:

With my boyfriend - I know it's just a silly thing - if he comes in and gets me reading, it's something like, "Hmm ... this boring stuff of yours". No compliments, or saying "It's good [that you read]" or "Are you busy?" and gets out. No: instead, I just put the book down and turn to him".

Sanezisiwe's description of putting her book down and turning to her boyfriend is not dissimilar to an image that appears in a Mills and Boon romance:

"His hands slid down her shoulders and his fingers began toying with the buttons down the front of her jumpsuit. She abandoned her search for a book and gripped the edge of the bookshelves for support. Nick edged closer behind her, the front of his body pressing against her back. She breathed deeply, inhaling his intoxicating male scent".
(Jeanne Allan, One Reckless Moment)

Woman's desire to become a heroine and secure a happy ending curtails the anger and resentment she may feel against men. The anger that the women felt and expressed through their reading of Tess of the D'Urbervilles was curtailed by their desire to find a way of reading men which confirmed the possibility that men could bring them happiness.

CASE STUDY III

Sukuma Secondary School stands on a hill in the township of Imbali outside Pietermaritzburg. Barbed wire curls along the top of its high cement walls and entry is through a tall steel turnstile and a gate of military - like proportions. Opposite, the windows of a warehouse are jagged and broken and as I arrived soldiers carrying large rifles were circling the building. Imbali, like the neighbouring Edendale, is one of the areas worst hit by UDF - Inkatha conflict and deaths are reported in the township almost every day. The school itself is conflict-ridden. The children are frequently sent home en masse by the headmaster. The issue may be the rape of women by male students in the hostels, the stabbing of a teacher, or a demand by the students for an SRC (Students Representative Council). On the other side of the school, "Kitskonstables" train in a courtyard: the most hated members of the black community, these men belong to paramilitary units set up by the government to squash township resistance.

At Sukuma, I interviewed three members of the administrative staff, Vuyelwa (or 'V'), Mildred and T__. The women appeared to be excited about the interview and were animated in discussion, although they found it difficult to talk about their responses to reading or the contents of books they had read.

Vuyelwa is a typist at Sukuma and Mildred and T__ are "Senior Administrative Education clerks". The women are all between the ages of 29 and 32, have completed matric and now have

children, although only Mildred is married. At the beginning of the interview, they wanted to know about, and appeared to become immersed in, my own story. They asked me in some detail about my boyfriend and the course that our relationship had taken. They expressed satisfaction at the fact that after having lived in separate countries for ^ayear, we would now spend time together. Further on in the interview, Mildred asked me to tell them how British society is different from their own and added that although she would like to go there, she knew that if she did she would never come home. Unlike other interviews where the women showed enthusiasm about the subject of the interview itself, the Sukuma women liked to talk to the interviewer herself, and to look for "happy endings" and "information about far-away places" in that story. This revealed the influence of particular kinds of stories in their lives, and romances appeared to be the only books that the women truly enjoyed.

Reading is associated in the women's minds with status, and even whiteness. 'V' enjoyed romances during her school years but when she left school she started reading novels because, "I thought, I'm old now, I can't keep on reading those books for juniors ... so I went to the CNA [Central News Agency, which sells cheap paperback fiction] and bought more expensive novels". V didn't enjoy these books as much as she had romances "but I thought when people see me reading these big books, they're going to say, "Oh, you are better now because you are reading those books". The thicker the book, according to V's system of meaning, the more the person who reads it is to be admired. She also makes a connection between books and white people:

"We grew up in rural areas where it is even difficult to see a white man or a white lady - you can't even know what he is saying ... if we grew up with the whites, we would be able to communicate with them, we'd be able to read their books - that's why we didn't have a lot of reading".

V, like the others, does not talk about the content of books but about what they represent to her. She concludes that she prefers to watch television and read the newspapers, particularly 'Echo', a supplement for black readers in the Natal Witness, Pietermaritzburg's only newspaper, because "it's free".

Like V and T__, Mildred never had the chance to use a library before senior school and, like them, she has read fewer and fewer books since she left school. (There is no library in Imbali or Edendale and Mildred has to use books from the central library in Pietermaritzburg for the course she is studying). Both her husband and her children disapprove of her reading. Towards the end of the interview, she says that she's interested in records and cassettes and not books, and adds that she likes songs "which have love stories in them".

There were moments in the interview in which the women, despite their general vitality, showed a sense of despair, an inability to see potential for change beyond present conditions. This applied both to their reading and to their lives. On the other hand, although they seldom seek imaginative escape through their reading, they do this through magazines, television and, in Mildred's case, music. They do see routes out of the present impasse and imagine worlds other, and better, than their own.

CASE STUDY IV

At Khanya College, a teaching institution run by SACHED (South African Council for Higher Education) in central Johannesburg which assists black students in gaining entrance to University, I interviewed five women. The women had been selected from a large number of applicants for the programme and were taking courses in History, English, Maths and other subjects. They seemed to know each other well and to spend a good deal of their leisure time together. Unlike most of the women I interviewed, they had read works by African authors, as part of their English course. This produced an interesting duality in their response to reading since they also valued romance reading. I interviewed Zandile, Alice, Magantu, Patricia and Thabang.

Zandile likes her favourite kinds of books "because they are different from the kind of life I live". Despite this desired 'difference' she finds that characters in books are similar to people and that heroines' reactions and feelings are similar to her own. Clearly then, she likes fictional characters to be sufficiently familiar as to be able to recognise herself in them and she likes to have a sense, when reading, that there are ways of living other than her own. Her list of favourite books is a complex combination of an African socialist novel, Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, and two western love thrillers,

Lace by Jackie Collins (Lace is, in fact, written by Shirley Conran) and Promise by Danielle Steele.

Alice's favourite kind of books are "books on romance", although she also states that she most often reads Heinemann African Writers Series novels. It is difficult to reconcile the two, particularly since she goes on to say that an unhappy ending, an ordinary hero or heroine and a hero who is stronger than a heroine should never be included in a book, that a heroine should display femininity and a hero protectiveness and bravery, and that she reads to escape her daily problems and because she "wishes her life was like the lives in stories". Although romances are likely to fit these requirements, most African Writers Series books are less likely to do so. Like Zandile, her list of favourite books is notable for its diversity: Tess of The D'Urbervilles (Thomas Hardy), Things Fall Apart (Chinua Achebe) and If Tomorrow Comes (Danielle Steele).

Magantu and Patricia both emphasize the importance of "relevance" in the books they read. Magantu likes books that are:

"not too fictitious or idealise the characters as if they are superbeings. Some have a moral lesson or relate what is happening in my society".

She reads more than four women's magazines a month, however, and lists her favourite books as The Thorn Birds, The Defector and Twilight Eyes. The authors she singles out are Danielle Steele and Chinua Achebe. Patricia similarly says

"The kinds of books that I like are those that conscientize people about their present-day life, things that affect their everyday life. Most books available today that claim to do this are in fact propaganda, written by government

sources".

Although stressing a 'reality-criterion' in her reading, Patricia states that pre-marital sex, a weak hero and a heroine who is stronger than the hero should never be included in a story. By excluding situations to be found in "real life", she desires that fiction should offer something other than the reality she experiences each day. Her favourite books are Mannequin (James Hadley Chase) and Things Fall Apart (Chinua Achebe), and her favourite authors are Chase, Ngugi and Achebe. The desire of both women to encounter the "real" or the "relevant" in their reading is counterbalanced by a desire for other kinds of reality. The women have difficulty in pinning down what the 'most real' is and therefore what a "relevant" book is. A women's magazine is as "relevant" to their lives as a novel by an African writer.

Finally, Thabang, in her description about the books she most likes to read, seems to combine both an element of the "relevant" and the notion of escaping to another world:

"I think books kind of include you in the scene, i.e. you are almost a part of the society in the book. You get involved there - even emotionally. You wish, together with others, you pray etc. So they are quite special in a sense that you have 'another life'. Those are good books".

Thabang's favourite books are fantasies, although she believes that nothing (rape or a cruel hero, for example) should ever be excluded from a story because "people must read about things happening in everyday life - they must read about almost anything". She does not list her favourite titles or authors, but writes instead "African writers books, fantasy, romance".

Thabang sees books as offering separate places in which she can live. But insofar as she can "wish together with others, you pray etc." with fictional characters, the fictional world is not alien to the world she inhabits. It is familiar but separate. It contains, one might say, all the 'good - familiar' and none of the 'bad - familiar'. Reading is a kind of pedestrian escapism for her - it takes her away from her world and provides her with "another life", but it leaves her on the ground rather than lifting her into the clouds. Like the other women, she prefers fictional worlds to her own.

The women's reading reflects a split between an 'African self' - a grounding of one's identity (or a location of meaning) in one's Africanness, or in one's awareness of oppression - and a self which desires imaginative escape from the politics of dominance and subservience (whether across race or gender). The women show a substantial degree of political consciousness, yet their discourse suggests the difficulty of relating political beliefs and commitment, rational and purposeful, to feelings, intuitions, fantasies and obsessions.

CONCLUSION

'Popular Romance and the Woman Reader' challenges assumptions still frequently made in studies of reading that the activity of reading 'light fiction', including romance, is a product of false consciousness. It attempts a symptomatic reading of oppositional practices which, although limited in their scope and effect, nevertheless dispute the control of ideological forms.

The study argues that, through restoring a woman's depleted sense of self, romance reading may constitute tacit recognition that the current form that heterosexual relationships tend to take is detrimental to her emotional well-being. The textual analysis attempts to reveal ways in which the woman reader's demands and desires are successfully met in fantasy (which may lessen her need for satisfaction in the real world). In the South African case studies in particular, the study attempts to make central active individuals, their creative and constructive activities and their essentially human practice of making meaning. Radway, in the conclusion to her study, aptly notes, "commodities like mass-produced romance texts are selected, purchased, constructed and used by real people with previously existing needs, desires, intentions and interpretative strategies".¹²⁸

One of the significant issues to have emerged from the study as a whole is the degree of similarity between the reading practices of women in Smithton, USA and black women in South

¹²⁸ Janice Radway, Reading the Romance, p.221.

Africa. Both groups of women were found on the whole to read the endings of books first, for example, to value the 'information' they found in romances, and to talk about their emotional responses to reading rather than the contents of the books themselves.

This has at least two important implications. It works, firstly, to de-emphasize the notion of an exclusively 'South African reader'. There has been amongst some cultural critics in South Africa an almost obsessive insistence that life under apartheid produces a response quite different from anywhere else in the world. Mbulelo Mzamane says, for example "Art and politics in South Africa ... have been inseparable for the simple reason that politics pervade all aspects of a black man's [sic] existence".¹²⁹ This can lead not only to an extreme self-reflexiveness which closes down possibilities for the production of new meaning, but can also be seen as an extreme form of ethnographic description: an (objective) cultural reality of apartheid is seen to produce (or, it is argued should produce) a particular kind of art and a particular kind of reader.

Secondly, the similarities between the two groups of women work to emphasize gender as an important component of analysis, including analysis of reading, where it has often been silenced in the name of race and class oppression (in Laurretta Ngcobo's work for example). Strong similarities between a community of western middle-class housewives and black women under apartheid

¹²⁹ Mbulelo Mzamane, 'Literature and Politics Amongst Blacks in South Africa', New Classic, 1978, p.42.

also suggests that at least some of the differences that have been set up (in much South African feminist writing, for example) between 'western' feminist theory and 'African feminism' need to be deconstructed. Although differences must be identified, attempts to be too defensively 'African' or 'South African' need to be challenged. In cultural criticism, including studies of readers and reading, as in gender studies, it may be that we need to explore issues and theories shared across a world community to build, not least, a better understanding of our difference.

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